

# Documenting botanical art collections in Australia

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## Abstract

The Botanic Gardens of Adelaide and State Herbarium have a policy of collecting Australian botanical illustrations. Examples of artists represented in the collection are given. The progress of a survey intended to locate Australian botanical art collections and biographical details on the artists is described. The need for conservation of other forms of pictorial botanical material is stressed.

Rather than looking backward at a long and imperfectly known list of artists who have left us their works, (paintings which simultaneously, have scientific and artistic importance), I here look at improvements which I suggest we should be urgently making to the ways in which our botanical illustrations are curated and managed. These suggestions stress the need for our institutions to work more closely together, in this case, not only herbaria and botanic gardens, but university departments, art galleries, museums and libraries. The problems of curation of botanical illustrations are truly interdisciplinary, truly exciting.

The advent of colour photography and technical improvements in equipment and printing processes have made a significant impact on how plants are illustrated in publications. For the purpose of this paper I shall not cover the issues of colour transparency collections, their storage, documentation and longevity, although they pose serious curatorial problems. There was once, about 30 years ago, an opinion held, that colour photography would replace traditionally executed botanical illustrations. But this has not come about, partly because of the intrinsic limitations of photography. No camera lens has yet been designed which can interpret the botanical subject like the human eye. The other main factor has been renewed interest in botanical illustrations since the late 1960s as may be seen from the number of books published on the subject since the classic work by Blunt (1950) and as may be seen in the final completion of *Banks's florilegium* some 200 years after Banks initiated the project (Steven 1988).

My own interest in botanical art goes back more than 20 years while working with botanical artists, Mary Grierson and Barbara Everard, on a popular book (Morley & Everard 1970), and a little later studying the works of Leonardo da Vinci (Morley 1979). Barbara had received her training more than 40 years earlier as one of a team of painters producing hand-painted wallpaper. This practical training enabled Barbara to very rapidly and dramatically cover large areas of paper with paint, either as a wash, or with a curious, almost impasto, use of watercolour. Barbara was not a trained botanist, but still discovered features which the botanist sometimes overlooked. She also had a splendid willingness to commit outrage as we jointly designed each plate in the book based on the

species I wished to feature; to challenge the colour printer's patience with the plate of the Apocynaceae of South America; plunder the Wisley *Rhododendron* collection for the plate of the Ericaceae of China and the Himalayas. The frontispiece of the book, featuring the splendid orchid *Renanthera coccinea*, shows Barbara's bold and exuberant wallpaper-style. There is a need to record such biographical detail of living artists for posterity; so much is often lost.

There are many artists who, like Barbara Everard, have painted Australian native plant species but have never visited the continent. Some of the earliest botanical illustrations of Australian plants were done by European artists using cultivated specimens grown in Europe by enthusiastic horticulturists, the specimens sometimes being unrepresentative of the species concerned; a topic elaborated by Charles Nelson (this volume). A number of illustrations were done by artists belonging to the early European expeditions, artists such as Sydney Parkinson (Carr 1983) and Ferdinand Bauer (Stearn 1976). There is a very large number of botanical illustrations featuring Australian plant material scattered throughout the collections of European institutions. Carrie Chambers told me in 1978 that Mrs Julie Marginson was making a preliminary survey of the works in London in 1977 with a view to publishing the results. But what of the botanical illustrations now in Australia which have been produced in Australia by Australians since first settlement? Who has recorded biographical details and anecdotes about these artists, living and deceased? Where are examples of these works to be found, and in what condition are they being kept?

I would like to be able to tell you where particular botanical artists are represented in the collections of particular institutions on a state by state basis. However, apart from one or two exceptions, such as the Mitchell Library holdings, there is no national catalogue which can be given. We all have useful bits of information; I know of the Margaret Stones collection in the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston; many know of those in the National Gallery of Victoria and others in the Melbourne University Gallery and Art Collection acquired through the 'basalt plains flora' project and through the Grimwade Bequests. Other collections are in the Botany Department of the University of Western Australia,

Nedlands; the Waite Agricultural Research Institute; Adelaide Botanic Garden; and so on. This is clearly an unsatisfactory situation. Which institutions and individuals are continuing to act as commissioning agents for living botanical illustrators and according to what guidelines; is it a matter of policy or personal whim? The late Lord Talbot de Malahide and the Hon. Rose Talbot, his sister, were responsible for commissioning one of the most recent local major botanical art projects on the endemic flora of Tasmania, but they were and are remarkable people.

It is probably fair to distinguish two sorts of botanical art as David Symon (Woore *et al.* 1988) has pointed out — 'flower paintings' such as the work of Ellis Rowan having an emphasis towards ornamental high art; and botanical drawings, such as the work of Margaret Stones and Celia Rosser, who are amongst the greatest living Australian botanical artists, and produce scientifically accurate depictions of plants. There is no clear distinction between the two categories, or the types of media used. However, pen and ink, pencil, and watercolour are the most commonly employed.

Relatively few botanical artists have made a full-time living from this type of work and this accounts for the large quantity of illustrations which exist having been executed in leisure time or, as we might today describe them, by weekend artists. In the nineteenth century flower painting was a favourite past time of many women. Of the Victorian flower paintings which have survived many lack scientific accuracy or scientific interest, often being based on commonly cultivated garden plants of the period, but many also have great charm, sometimes feature old garden cultivars and deserve to be properly catalogued and curated for posterity. They occur as single paintings or in volumes, often bound in non-acid free papers and boards which pose a curatorial nightmare.

In 1978 David Sless, a colleague then lecturing at the Flinders University of South Australia, and I made a brief survey of an assortment of Australian institutions (art galleries, libraries, botanic gardens, university departments) likely to house botanical illustrations. It soon became apparent that 'botanical illustrations' as a category either failed to feature in the curatorial policy of institutions, or existed only for their curiosity value or antiquarian novelty. Sometimes the works represented the forgotten leftovers of the artwork prepared for a publication, or a collection of somewhat embarrassing paintings left in the will of the deceased artist, or by the artist's family. There were several institutions in the survey which had a policy for collecting botanical illustrations, but they were in a minority; I'm delighted to report they included the University of Melbourne Gallery and Art Collection!

It became clear to Sless and me a decade ago that greater coordination needed to exist between a range of different science and arts institutions sharing a rich heritage of botanical illustrations. The Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Pittsburgh, has produced a series of valuable catalogues listing biographical details of the artists represented in their botanical illustration collections with one or two illustrations of the work of the artists (Lawrence 1968, Korach 1972, Secrist & Howard 1977, White & Wendel 1983). A

similar national catalogue, or catalogues, for Australia would be a useful project. Compilation work is at present being undertaken in Adelaide towards this sort of end. Mrs Phyll McKillup, an M.A. student from the Flinders University of South Australia, is preparing a thesis examining how the visualization of biological organisms by artists has changed through the centuries; part of her project includes an overview of Australian botanical illustration since colonization.

Encouraging and directing the enquiries of students is only one way of helping promote a better understanding of Australian botanical illustrations. Even small institutions can make a contribution. In the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide and State Herbarium a policy has been adopted to collect and curate examples of botanical illustration primarily by Australian artists. Although only about ten years old, the policy has resulted in a spectacular growth of the collection. The South Australian Museum has transferred its rich collection of Ellis Rowan (Hazzard 1984) and Alison Ashby paintings in recognition of this new curatorial policy. New illustrations for the collection have been purchased and commissioned by the Botanic Gardens Board and Friends. A specialized gallery to display periodically the holdings has been created to acceptable professional display standards. Several successful exhibitions featuring old and new botanical illustrations have been held, the most recent being in the 1988 Adelaide Arts Festival featuring Ellis Rowan (Woore *et al.* 1988). The collections are being catalogued with voluntary help and are being professionally conserved with funds from sponsorship in the absence of Government resources.

There is much improved awareness of the significance of botanical illustrations amongst the Friends and community at large. Several local commercial galleries, such as Bonython Meadmore Gallery, have for the first time held exhibitions of botanical illustration which is significant bearing in mind the smaller clientele of Adelaide compared with Sydney or Melbourne.

A foundation has been created based on sales of Alison Ashby products featuring her native plant paintings (Ling 1981). At present the products are postcards, greeting cards, notelets and a Christmas card. The Alison Ashby Foundation is intended to fund research and a better understanding and utilization of native plants in gardens, but is based on the power of the botanical illustration.

Our Friends commissioned local artist Jan Woodman to design and paint the commercially successful posters featuring the wildflowers of the Mount Lofty Ranges and Flinders Ranges. The originals are part of the collection. As a direct result, an anonymous donor sponsored Jan Woodman to receive improved botanical training in the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium. Thus, the institutional policy to promote botanical illustration is already materially helping the artist in the community and enriching the community experience through regular, carefully planned exhibitions.

It would be fitting if this symposium, held in Australia's bicentennial year, could mark the beginning of a coordinated move to give consideration to preparing a national catalogue of the botanical illustrations in public institutions in Australia. Perhaps coordinated

on a state basis by selected centres in each state, it might receive funding through a federal source. It would doubtless be a substantial project. There is certainly a need, for at present I believe we have only fragmentary and scattered records of the work of botanical artists held in Australian institutions. Sampson (1985) has made a useful contribution to documenting early botanical art in New Zealand in the period of James Cook to T. F. Cheeseman's *Manual of the New Zealand Flora*. The focus of attention of this neglected form of art could also help improve the conditions under which much of it is presently stored.

The publication programme of my own organization has a component which seeks to feature the work of lesser known botanical artists wherever possible. In this way the crayon work of Collin Wooleoek was used in the fourth edition of the *Flora of South Australia* as well as line drawings of a variety of other artists, also regularly featured in our house journal. Commercial publishers have used some of our paintings in joint venture publications (Lothian 1974), or have commissioned artists to prepare illustrations for books (Morley & Toelken 1983), artwork subsequently being added to the collection.

#### Summary

- \* It is suggested that a coordinated, national programme is required to survey and document the botanical illustrations held in public collections, and where sufficiently large, in private collections also. A range of scientific and arts institutions may be mutually involved.
- \* Experience in South Australia demonstrates significant public benefit from active promotion of botanical art. Artists, sponsors and donors all benefit. Better exhibition facilities, improved curatorial standards, as well as base documentation of holdings are results of improved awareness. There is an enrichment of the quality of life of the general community.

- \* A diversity of educational and commercial opportunities can flow from active promotion of botanical art in any institution visited by the public.
- \* It is as important to provide opportunity and patronage for botanical artists today, as to curate our heritage of botanical art from the past.

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